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Administration lie-detector plans scored

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The Reagan administration's idea of using lie detectors to identify leakers of classified information received searing criticism yesterday despite assurances that the use would be limited to serious security breaches.

"This administration is opposed to indiscriminate use of the polygraph," Deputy Assistant Attorney General Richard K. Willard testified before the House Government Operations subcommittee on national security.

"Use of this technique should be limited to situations where it clearly serves an overriding national interest," Willard said.

But other witnesses rejected his arguments.

"It's more of a fear detector than a lie detector," Dr. John H. Gibbons, director of Congress' Office of Technology Assessment, said. He pointed out that the device only measures heart rate and skin moisture.

Hence, Gibbons said, the lie detector, or polygraph, may indicate a person is lying when he actually is not, but is

simply nervous, while a skilled or hardened liar could beat the test.

Dr. John F. Beary III, associate dean of the Georgetown University medical school and a former assistant secretary of defense, added, "Any competent spy is going to have no trouble passing this."

George Ball, undersecretary of state under President Johnson, said, "Our current obsession with the Soviet Union should not lead us to imitate the very Soviet methods and attitudes our leaders most insistently deplore."

CBS correspondent Bob Schieffer, representing the Society of Professional Journalists, Sigma Delta Chi, said the proposal would have a "real and rude and unreasonable" impact on reporters.

"Only the uninformed or the naive could believe that the directive is really designed to prevent leaks jeopardizing national security," he said. "The real goal of the directive seems more odious: the control of government information."

The targets of the criticism were a directive the White House issued last March and a proposal the Pentagon is considering for using the polygraph in

investigations of specific leaks of classified information.

Congress also has shown concern about using the polygraph to test government employees. It imposed a delay in any changes in Defense Department policy until next April 15, to provide time for more hearings.

Dr. Kenneth J. Coffey of the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress, said polygraphs would have deterred few of the 328 leaks the executive branch has reported in the past five years.

Willard pointed out that leaks of classified information have "appeared in the media regularly and frequently over last decade" although they are clearly illegal.

"Examples of the harm caused by such disclosures are themselves classified and cannot be provided in a public hearing," Willard said.

President Reagan restated his concern in a memo to federal employees last August, saying he intended to punish offenders administratively "regardless of rank or position."

"Where circumstances warrant, cases will also be referred for criminal prosecution," Reagan said.



Julie Gaines Washington Times